

Sgt. Bill Mauldin

'The enlisted man's cartoonist'

Editor's note: Bill Mauldin died Jan. 22, 2003, at the age of 81. This article first appeared in the Winter 1992 edition of the NCO Journal and is reprinted here in its entirety.

By Jim Collins

In war "humor is sanity." Makes sense to me.

There is experience and authority behind that statement, for it comes from the man considered the foremost military cartoonist of all time — Bill Mauldin.

He created the cartoon characters Willie and Joe, who appeared in the Mediterranean edition of *Stars and Stripes* during World War II, in other publications and in numerous books that followed.

Now living in semi-retirement in Santa Fe, N.M., Mauldin shares with the *Journal* and its readers some cartoons, some stories behind the cartoons and comment on combat.

"Without humor, war would drive any sane person out of his mind. War is insane, an outrage, barbaric and devoid of sense," Mauldin believes.

The two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, although not a high school graduate, has six honorary degrees and doctorates. Born on a farm in Mountain Park, N.M., his life-long love affair with the Army began "when I was a youngster. It was a great event for me to watch a whole cavalry division on mountain maneuvers near my home. Those Soldiers were 20 feet tall to me."

In 1941, while in the Army in Louisiana, Mauldin was "captured" by a couple of Yellow Legs, members of one of the 45th Division's last regiments on horseback.

"As resourceful cavalymen, they had some canned beer in their saddle bags. They shared a brew with me while I told them about my exposure to the Army as a kid in New Mexico.

"This grizzled master sergeant drove up in a shrunken version of what was to become the Jeep. (Actually, Mauldin said, it was the first Jeep-like vehicle he had ever seen, made by a small company called American Bantam.) As we shot the bull, I told him I came from a long line of grease monkeys and asked if he would mind if I took a look underneath. I was interested in the way the front axle was made and asked him if the axle broke what he'd do to his vehicle. . . shoot it?"

And thus was born one of Mauldin's most-used, most "redrawn" and most remembered



© Bill Mauldin

cartoons, showing a first sergeant preparing to shoot his trusty steed, which had suffered the mechanical equivalent of a broken leg.

"I didn't realize at the time that I'd created a perfect cartoon. No words were needed to convey the message."

Not all of Mauldin's cartoon messages were welcomed in all quarters. He is not called "the enlisted man's cartoonist" without reason, for the strictly enlisted perspective of Willie and Joe did not always agree with those at headquarters.

Gen. George Patton once called him on the carpet over his "grimy" portrayal of Soldiers. But, then, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower admired the sergeant's work.

Mauldin's perspective is understandable. He comes from a long line of

Soldiers "who fought as enlisted men in all the American wars. I still kid my son, Bruce, who retired as a lieutenant colonel, for breaking the family's enlisted tradition.

"During a second tour in Vietnam, Bruce [a captain at the time] was an airborne chauffeur flying a Huey (helicopter).





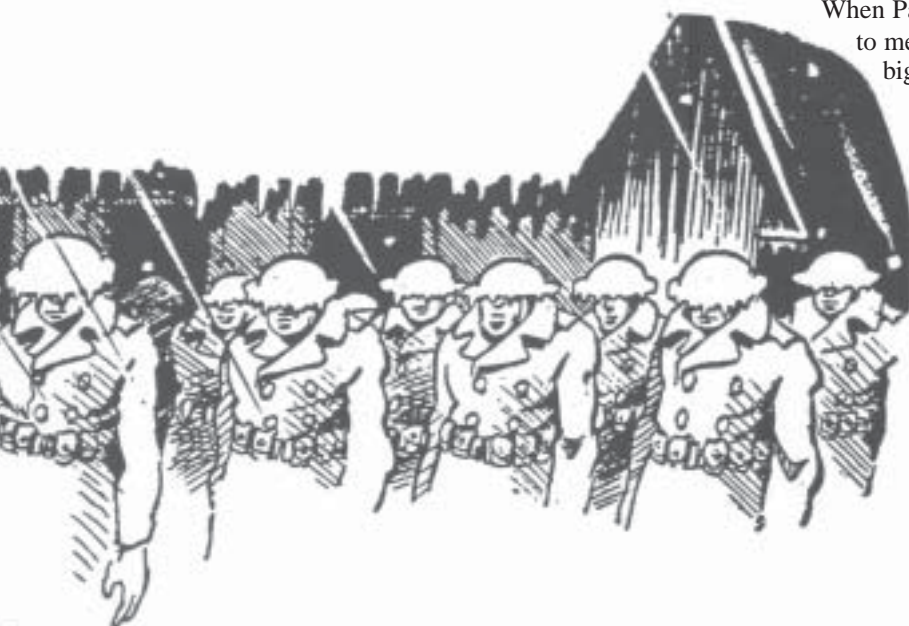
"Unnerstand, I want just as much respect around here as if I was still first sergeant!"

© Bill Mauldin



"I need a couple of guys what don't owe me no money fer a little routine patrol."

© Bill Mauldin



"That's all I have to say this morning, men. All right, dismissed . . . I said dismissed!"

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Brig. Gen. George S. Patton III [son of WWII Patton] got on board and told him to fly him back to his Command Post. When Patton saw Bruce's nameplate, he asked if he was related to me. Bruce told him I was his father and they both had a big laugh."

Every Veterans Day, cartoonist Charles Schulz does a "Peanuts" tribute to Mauldin's Willie and Joe. "I'd never met Charlie and I had no idea why he had been doing this. When I finally did meet him, I thanked him because after each Veterans Day I'd get a lot of orders for my books. I told him I thought it was great, that he kept old-timers like me in circulation, but what had I ever done for him.

"He said, 'I was a machine gunner in France in World War II,' and that made sense to me."

As we departed, the former sergeant extended an invitation: "Any time a sergeant wants to drop by and drink a beer, he's welcome."

And that made sense to me.

Editor's note: Jim Collins was the managing editor of the NCO Journal at the time he wrote this article.

